

As Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took the stage today to address students at Columbia University, his government was working at his direction to find and expel students from Iranian universities—solely based on the religion they practice.

There is a little-told story from Iran—a story we thought would forever stay buried in the darkness of 1930s Europe. This story is about a religion founded in Iran in the mid-1800s that has become Iran's largest religious minority with over 250,000 members.

As the representative in Congress for the Baha'i Temple of North America, I know that the Baha'i faith preaches peace, tolerance and diversity of thought—values we embrace on the North Shore. But in an oppressive Islamic dictatorship like Iran, Baha'i values pose a clear and present danger to the regime.

In March of 2006, just a few months into Ahmadinejad's presidency, the Command Headquarters of Iran's Armed Forces ordered the police, Revolutionary Guard and Ministry of Information to identify all Baha'is and collect information on their activities.

Two months later, the Iranian Association of Chambers of Commerce began compiling a list of Baha'is serving in every business sector.

In May of last year, 54 Baha'is were arrested in Shiraz and held for several days without trial—the largest roundup of Baha'is since the 1980s. Then in August, Iran's feared Ministry of the Interior ordered provincial officials to “cautiously and carefully monitor and manage” all Baha'i social activities. The Central Security Office of Iran's Ministry of Science, Research and Technology ordered 81 Iranian universities to expel any student discovered to be a Baha'i. A letter issued in November from one university stated that it is Iranian policy to prevent Baha'is from enrolling in universities and to expel Baha'is upon discovery.

This year, the safety of Iranian Baha'is continued to deteriorate. This year, 104 Baha'is were expelled from Iranian universities. In February, police in Tehran and surrounding towns entered Baha'i homes and businesses to collect details on family members. The First Branch of the Falard Public Court refused to hear a lawsuit “due to the plaintiffs' belonging to the Bahaist sect.”

In April, the Iranian Public Intelligence and Security Force ordered 25 industries to deny business licenses to Baha'is. The Ministry of Information threatened to shut down one company unless it fired all Baha'i employees. Banks are closing Baha'i accounts and refusing loans to Baha'i applicants. Just last week, the Iranian government bulldozed a Baha'i cemetery, erasing the memory of thousands of Iranian citizens.

The U.S. State Department's 2007 Report on International Religious Freedom paints an even darker picture.

"Broad restrictions on Bahá'ís severely undermined their ability to function as a community. The Government repeatedly offers Bahá'ís relief from mistreatment in exchange for recanting their faith.

"Bahá'ís may not teach or practice their faith or maintain links with coreligionists abroad. Bahá'ís are often officially charged with "espionage on behalf of Zionism"...

"Since late 2005 Bahá'ís have faced an increasing number of public attacks...Radio and television broadcasts have also increasingly condemned the Bahá'ís and their religion...

"Public and private universities continued either to deny admittance to or expel Bahá'í students."

We have seen this movie before—the opening scenes of one of the most horrific episodes in human history. What happened to our solemn promise of 'never again' made in 1945?

Never again would the international community stay silent about laws banning one group from attending school. Never again would we ignore orders to register with the government and report on your family's whereabouts. Never again would we welcome a leader who has ordered a religious minority to be subject to secret police monitors and nightly round-ups.

When President Ahmadinejad rose to address the student body at Columbia—a school extolling

the virtues of tolerance and diversity—why was there no mention of Baha'i student expulsion in Iran?

This is a defining moment for our new century. The lessons of the 20th century gave us all the warning signs of what will come if we do not speak out. The Iranian President has spoken – will we?

“Then they came for...” the Baha'is -- we pray the poem ends differently this time.